

Continuing Professional Development: developing a vision

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ABSTRACT *Although Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is widely promoted through the policies and programmes of UK professional associations, it is an ambiguous concept. There is confusion regarding its definition and purpose in both academic and practitioner literature, which extends to professionals themselves. Thirty (18 employees and 12 of their employers) professionals were interviewed about their thoughts on the definition and value of CPD, and a further 40 professionals discussed the concepts and value of CPD in focus groups. Professionals have a limited view of CPD—seeing it as training, a means of keeping up-to-date, or a way to build a career. However, professional associations claim that CPD is: part of lifelong learning; a means of gaining career security; a means of personal development; a means of assuring the public that individual professionals are up-to-date; a method whereby professional associations can verify competence; and a way of providing employers with a competent and adaptable workforce. These claims are often made concurrently. We conclude by putting forward some suggestions towards clarifying the definitions and purposes of CPD and linking it more closely with the ideals of professionalism.*

Introduction

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has become, at least notionally, part of professional life for many UK professionals. A survey of professional associations conducted by the Professional Associations Research Network (PARN) at the University of Bristol in 1999 found that of the 162 respondents, 62% had developed a CPD policy and programme. Six per cent had some other form of post-qualification learning programme such as Continuing Medical Education and a further 5% were in the process of developing programmes. Those without CPD were mainly very small associations of less than 1500 members (Friedman *et al.*, 2000). Professional associations, therefore, are largely committed to incorporating CPD into the working lives of their members. Yet it would appear that professional associations do not have a clear vision of what CPD is or what it is for, although such a vision would enable them to develop policies and programmes to achieve it.

CPD is first discussed in the context of the learning society. It is part of the same wider discourse; a discourse that according to Coffield (2000, p. 3), is 'shot through

[...] by extreme conceptual vagueness' and by widespread and deep-seated disagreements about the nature of work and learning. We go on to show that CPD is also 'conceptually vague'. Definitional variety suggests there are a number of competing conceptions as to the purpose of CPD. An empirical study is then described, which sought the views of individual professionals on what they believe constitutes CPD and for whose benefit it is undertaken. The study shows that individuals are also unclear as to the nature and purpose of CPD. Finally, the authors speculate on and present a vision of a possible future direction of CPD which could clarify the purpose of CPD and its relation to professionalism.

Ambiguity in the Definition of CPD

Coffield argues that a single vision of the learning society is impossible as he has identified 10 competing models which address the nature of learning and the learner and his/her relationship within the workplace and society in different ways (Coffield, 2000, p. 8). Examples of these which seem particularly relevant to CPD include: skills growth associated with increasing economic competitiveness; personal development aimed at promoting self-fulfilment; social control in terms of disguising conflicts of interests between employers and employees; and the creation of a learning market through introducing market principles to adult education.

Young also notes the large variety of conflicting interpretations of the learning society which reflect different interests and objectives so that there can be little agreement on how to progress towards them (Young, 1998). Edwards (1997) has identified a number of objectives, including: providing learning opportunities to educate adults to meet challenges associated with change and citizenship; creating a learning market to meet goals of economic competitiveness and self-reliance; and creating learning networks in which individuals and groups participate to pursue their own goals.

The different claims made for the learning society are reflected in the variety of claims made for CPD, which in turn suggest different concepts of the purpose of learning related to professional work. According to promotional CPD literature produced by professional associations, CPD is (and often concurrently):

- *lifelong learning* for professionals;
- a means of *personal development*;
- a means for individual professionals to ensure a measure of control and *security* in the often precarious modern workplace;
- a means of *assuring a wary public* that professionals are indeed up-to-date, given the rapid pace of technological advancement;
- a means whereby *professional associations can verify that the standards* of their professionals are being upheld;
- a means for *employers to garner a competent, adaptable workforce* (Friedman *et al.*, 2000).

Thus CPD promises to deliver strategies of learning that will be of benefit to individuals, foster personal development, and produce professionals who are

flexible, self-reflective and empowered to take control of their own learning. This emphasis on the personal, however, could conflict with concepts of CPD as a means of training professionals to fulfil specific work roles and as a guarantee of individual, professional competence.

The promotional literature often includes a definition of CPD. Again, definitional variety between professional associations indicates that there is no single concept of CPD that is widely accepted. The Construction Industry Council (1986) definition is widely quoted in the literature (Tomlinson, 1993; Rapkins, 1996; Kennie, 1998) and has been adopted by 40% of UK professional associations (Friedman *et al.*, 2000):

CPD is the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the practitioner's working life. (Construction Industry Council, 1986, p. 3)

This definition encompasses professional and technical competence together with personal qualities. However, the majority of professional associations have adopted other definitions of CPD, almost all also different from each other (Friedman *et al.*, 2000). Some define it as a mode of education and/or learning, some as an activity in itself and some as an approach. Some define it as the responsibility of individuals, and others as a means of measurement. According to Guest (2000, p. 4):

It can sometimes seem that there are as many definitions of CPD as there are professional institutions encouraging their members to participate in it. We all think that we know what the words 'continuing', 'professional' and 'development' mean until we come to define them.

Models of CPD presented in the academic literature further illustrate the different conceptions of professional learning, nature of professional work and nature of the professional/client relationship suggested in the promotional literature. These are reflected in the way CPD is carried out, in the way it is monitored and in the compliance policies of associations. Faulkner (1996) presents an inputs/outputs model related to recording and monitoring CPD. The inputs framework conceives of CPD in terms of completing a certain number of learning hours or gaining learning points, often through structured, formal training. The 'tick-box' recording of this process is regarded as evidence of the maintenance and updating of professional skills. In contrast, the outputs framework emphasises the outcome of the learning experience and its impact on individual practice related to individual needs. Madden and Mitchell (1993) identify a 'sanctions model' and a 'benefits model' of CPD policy and practice. The former emphasises demonstrating competence; it is generally compulsory, compliance is monitored and measured by inputs, and activities are designed to update technical knowledge and skill. The benefits model is oriented at the individual, is voluntary, and focused on outputs. Todd (1987, p. 37) suggests that there are those: 'who see professionals as emotionally neutral, technical experts ... [who] do something *to (or for)* a client'; and: 'those who view professional practice as an arena for personal engagement between professional and client ... in

other words a professional works *with* a client'. The first approach would regard personal attributes as irrelevant, the second approach would value them highly. The first approach is technocratic, emphasising technical knowledge and the acquisition of technical skills, while the second emphasises reflection and self-evaluation.

If there is little agreement on the objectives of CPD or the steps needed to achieve them, or if CPD programmes try to encompass conflicting objectives, it seems likely that individual professionals will be unclear as to why they should participate in CPD. Little previous academic work has been undertaken in this field, and, as noted below, it was found to be relatively unusual for professional associations themselves to survey the degree of 'customer satisfaction' with their CPD programmes. The research therefore focuses on the attitudes and experiences of professionals and their employers, shedding light on what professionals themselves think constitutes CPD and who it should benefit.

Methodology

The research was structured in two phases. First, a comprehensive survey was undertaken of all the surveys conducted by professional associations over the last three years into their members' attitudes to CPD. These surveys were analysed and generated comments on the reflective practices of professional associations themselves (Friedman *et al.*, 2001). Between July and September 2000, 436 professional associations were telephoned to identify those who had carried out any exercise to examine their members' experiences of CPD. Surveys run by external agents as well as those run by the associations themselves were included. Responses to the telephone survey were secured from 269 associations. Forty-seven had carried out member surveys on the subject of CPD and of these, 19 provided copies of their survey reports. This 'survey of surveys' shows that there is a wide variation in the level of participation in CPD programmes across professional bodies. However, a clear picture of attitudes to CPD did not emerge, as very few associations had specifically addressed this issue. In addition, diversity in the form and methodology of surveys made comparison difficult.

The second phase involved conducting semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with professionals and their employers and holding focus groups of professionals. A qualitative approach has been found to give an accurate impression of issues related to CPD by a small number of participants (Wood, 1998). The focus group format produces data through group interaction as participants share and compare their experiences. This provides insight into complex behaviour and motivations that might otherwise be inaccessible (Morgan, 1997).

Potential participants were members of 18 different professional associations. Associations were selected on the basis of compliance criteria of their CPD policies (whether programmes were compulsory, obligatory or voluntary) and sectoral spread. We wished to stratify the sample according to profession and length of post-qualification experience: junior (up to five years' post-qualification experience); mid- (between five and ten years' experience); and senior (over ten years' experience) as there may have been differences in attitudes to CPD in different age and

professional groups. However, data protection legislation meant that associations were unable to allow the researchers access to their membership lists and were unable themselves to select a random sample within each of the strata. A variety of means were therefore used to identify and contact potential interviewees:

- Some associations sent letters to a random selection of their members who resided or were employed in Bristol and London. These locations were specified to facilitate organisation; many associations are headquartered in London and the researchers are based at the University of Bristol.
- An advertisement was placed in one association's newsletter, giving details of the research, asking interested individuals to contact the researchers.

However, these methods generated a very limited response. A more direct approach was therefore adopted:

- CPD officers at associations identified a number of different individuals with varying levels of post-qualification experience (from newly qualified to senior partners or managers). These individuals were selected based on the contact that the CPD officers had previously had with them.
- Eighteen members at one association had previously participated in research undertaken by the CPD officer. They were contacted and asked if they were willing to be interviewed.

In addition, individual branch secretaries/CPD coordinators were contacted and asked to select a number of individuals according to length of post-qualification experience. The researchers were given their contact details when they agreed to be interviewed.

Once a number of contacts from each association had been identified, a final sample of 18 was selected for interview. The sample contained six individuals from each of the categories of post-qualification experience. In addition, 40 further individual professionals, drawn from the pool of potential interviewees, were involved in a series of two face-to-face and three internet-based focus groups.

Between August 2000 and February 2001, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 18 individual professionals and the employers or line managers of 12 of the 18. In many cases, the employer/line manager was also a professional in his/her own right and therefore offered insights as an individual as well as in his/her role as representative of the employing organisation. Employees' permission was obtained before their line managers were approached, interviews with employees and line managers were conducted separately and strict confidentiality was observed.

The focus groups were conducted between November 2000 and February 2001. The researchers used actual comments and opinions raised in the professional associations' CPD member surveys to create scenarios that would prompt participants to think about, share and discuss their own experiences. The scenarios addressed issues of time management, recording and planning CPD, self-reflection and work-life balance.

Clearly, the results of a qualitative approach cannot be generalised to the wider

population of professionals. However, the purpose of the interviews and focus groups was not to discover the relative importance of issues among professionals. Rather an indication of the *range* of issues that were seen as influential and important with regards to CPD by some professionals was sought. In addition, in order to agree to give up their valuable time to participate in an interview or a focus group, it could be assumed that participants were particularly interested in CPD for some reason and had a view to express. It is unlikely that professionals who are apathetic about CPD would volunteer. These assumptions were borne out by the interview responses; most participants described their own reactions to CPD and/or learning as different from and more positive than that of their workplace colleagues.

With the exception of one association, introductions to members provided by associations were highly biased towards senior professionals and those who were particularly enthusiastic about CPD. The wider search for participants into this study still attracted those who were interested and enthusiastic. In this light, some of the negative reactions to CPD are particularly striking.

Practitioners' Perspectives

What is CPD?

The definitional variety of CPD was reflected in respondents' views as to what CPD is and what it is for. Moreover, respondents were aware that their views were individual and not necessarily shared by colleagues. The majority of professionals, and some managers speaking as professionals themselves, saw CPD at its most fundamental as a means of keeping up-to-date in their fields; something that professionals would 'just do' with or without a formal programme:

I think that certainly if you're in a profession, it's something that you yourself should expect of yourself anyway, to keep yourself continually up-to-date.

A minority regarded CPD primarily as a way of broadening their skills and knowledge base in order to maintain their position in a competitive marketplace. Employers also recognised the value of developing new skills although they usually addressed this from a personal rather than organisational perspective:

There seems to be an endless process of change but I guess what the intention of the [scheme] is really to give you a much broader outlook on why these changes are coming about and moving outside your own areas

....

Others were simply confused: 'I'd just like to know what the end goal is.'

However, while none of the participants disagreed with the principle of ongoing learning and development, its formalisation into a structured programme met substantial resistance from half the employees. They regarded planning, recording and reflecting as a bureaucratic process separate from learning activities which would be carried out anyway. CPD could, in these terms, be regarded not as support for professionalism, but as a threat to professional autonomy:

I think I was annoyed when I got the [CPD] stuff where they said they expect me to write a sort of professional development plan every year, I think well what the hell, you know that's entirely up to me, I'm a professional person, I don't have to jump through hoops to do this ...

Several felt that CPD was another example of the 'audit society' (Power, 1997) which was undermining professionalism:

I suppose CPD is another means of recording, monitoring what people do ... It's only an external thing isn't it? Internally you know whether you need to do things and carry on anyway and the only reason for doing CPD is to show other people that you're doing it.

It is perhaps instructive that when, at the end of a focus group, one participant asked whether the abolition of formal CPD programmes would make any difference to their own approaches to development and growth the remaining five participants unanimously answered 'No'. There was also some evidence that planning and reflecting are perceived as difficult, which may account for some of the resistance to formalisation. In turn, this might indicate that professional associations give insufficient guidance in this area.

Managers were more markedly against formalising CPD (eight out of 12), although many talked about this in the context of their own CPD, rather than as employers. There is a widespread belief among professional associations that older and more senior professionals are more likely to resist participation in CPD programmes (although research undertaken by two associations presents some evidence to the contrary [1]), and this might explain their more negative attitude.

Supporters of formalisation, on the other hand, tended to regard elements such as planning and reviewing as integral parts of the learning process which shapes the content and renders it more meaningful as it provides a structure that encourages focus, discipline and motivation. The monitoring and quantifying activities associated with formalisation could be seen positively, providing 'proof' of attainment that could be of personal use, perhaps for updating a CV, as well as for audit purposes.

Others believed that formalised CPD is useful for encouraging employer support for CPD (which is interesting in light of the marked aversion of the employer respondents to formalised CPD):

If you have a forward plan and so forth, you can then screw the time out of management, together with courses you need to do for forward learning. If there's no plan, there's always some crisis going, they'll never give you the time to do anything ... so I think if you've got a structured list, it's a lot easier for you to follow the path.

Although CPD was regarded primarily as a means of maintaining competence, more than half the employees interviewed indicated that they do (or would do) CPD as much for personal development and interest as for professional development. Employers, however, were not generally interested in personal development and were only willing to support CPD activities which would directly benefit the organisation:

We wouldn't support anything which has no relevance at all ... the objective obviously is to identify organisational training needs and line those up with the employees so that we can direct our spending and training in a way which is going to be of most benefit to the service that's being provided.

Although respondents were generally positive about their experiences of CPD, even though opinions differed on details, it was striking that many thought of themselves as atypical. According to one, 'I think I'm keener than the average'. Another more pointedly said: 'I've spoken about CPD to lots of people and very few of them take it seriously.' Seven participants were highly cynical about other professionals' involvement in CPD; they believed that falsification of records was not uncommon, and would become more so if more compulsory schemes were introduced.

Beneficiaries of CPD

Most employees (17) believed that the individual professional was the main beneficiary of CPD. It would help to increase standing within the profession, perhaps by leading to a higher grade of membership, or to protect or progress a career:

I would hope [CPD would benefit] myself ... because it's building up my own knowledge base so that's going to help me in this job and any other roles within the company as they come up in addition to that.

The respondent quoted above believes that CPD will enable him/her to become flexible and take advantage of career opportunities. CPD was, however, seen as limited in its scope as a more proactive means of career planning.

Others focused on personal development for satisfying personal rather than career interests:

... it's a value to me personally ... for the first time in my academic career, if you like, I'm doing things that I want to do because they're interesting.

Interestingly, a higher proportion of employees than employers recognised that CPD would benefit their employing organisations. This suggests that employers are either relatively unaware of the professional development activities undertaken by their staff, or do not think they are entirely appropriate.

Three employees and two employers believed that the professional association was the primary beneficiary. These respondents took a somewhat cynical view that CPD helped to shore up the status of the profession:

It must help institutions, it must raise their brief and it must demonstrate that they are a profession.

One respondent argued that some professional associations use CPD in a competitive way to maintain their 'brand' against other professional associations, particularly if they are unchartered. Another regarded a focus on CPD by a professional

association as a shamed response to a high-profile scandal caused by professional incompetence which had brought that particular association into disrepute.

The CPD promotional literature produced by professional associations often links undertaking CPD to professional codes of conduct, explicitly connecting development and keeping up-to-date with standards of behaviour and a sense of obligation to clients and society expected of professionals (Friedman *et al.*, 2002). Respondents, however, only mentioned society or clients in passing, if at all. This is evidence of a tension between CPD as primarily for the benefit of the individual or employer and the principle expressed in professional codes that maintenance of competence is a professional obligation due to society. Indeed, when respondents spoke of CPD as something that professionals ‘just do’, it is possible that they are referring to an obligation to their job role and to their organisation and not to a sense of ‘professional’ identity. It could also be interpreted in terms of self-interest—professionals might ‘just do’ such activities in order to stay abreast in an insecure and competitive job market. That CPD is connected with self-interest is also indicated by those who felt that the professional association is the primary beneficiary, although here it is the association that is being ‘selfish’. This could indicate a mismatch between the concept of what it is to be a professional held by members, and that espoused by professional associations.

CPD Activities

Different opinions regarding the formalisation and scope of CPD were reflected in different views on the activities which ‘counted’ as CPD. It was important to respondents that CPD provided a means whereby employers and clients could recognise that legitimate learning and development had occurred. Legitimacy therefore suggested formal training courses targeted at the requirements of work-in-hand, or an academic qualification. Most of the employees interviewed (15) mentioned formal training as a CPD activity in which they had participated. Formal qualifications were regarded as more desirable than ‘a woolly portfolio’ because they were widely recognised, portable and bankable. Most respondents had undertaken informal learning activities such as self-directed reading, but were doubtful that this was a *bona fide* CPD activity. It often seemed that learning had to be something difficult or painful to be worthwhile and that informal activities could be ‘a bit of an easy option ... I mean, all right, you’re reading journals, but so what. You would anyway. I don’t think it’s a positive enough step.’ Subsequent learning steps, such as evaluating the journal articles and reflecting on their applicability to practice and the learning resulting from gaining experience in practising what has been learned (Eraut, 2001), do not appear to have been recognised.

Employers tended to focus on training courses as a medium for CPD, with ten out of the sample of 12 mentioning them. Next came formal short events such as seminars and workshops, with seven employers considering them valid for CPD. Five employers thought informal activities worth mentioning.

The Competence Question

Paradoxically, although most professionals wanted CPD activities to confer legitimacy on their learning, none of the sample (employees or employers) believed that current programmes could genuinely demonstrate that they were competent to practice. We would argue that this is a further indication of fundamental tensions within CPD rather than cynical credentialism, bearing in mind that most participants were reasonably positive about learning. As well as questioning what should be measured—knowledge, or improvement in practice, or both—measurement itself was regarded as problematic. A certificate of course attendance is an indication of physical presence only, and not of learning:

... you can go along to a talk but if you're not paying particular attention ... you can tick a box here and not there ... but what have you actually gained? You could have been asleep couldn't you?

Portfolios evinced a good deal of scepticism as well, because it is not possible to verify their accuracy and might only indicate that an individual is, as a focus group participant put it, 'good at paperwork'. Participants believed that competence has to be judged *in situ* through observation of practice rather than the more nebulous proofs provided by certificates of attendance or portfolios:

No, CPD is not evidence [of competency]. You have to see the [person] working ... I can write whatever it is that I feel I got out of it but a piece of paper saying that you've attended a course and your reflections on it, I don't think that acts as evidence of competency at all.

It was also argued that CPD and competency not only are separate but need to be kept separate as they perform different functions:

That's why we have a licensing scheme ... I mean that proves competence by going through a list of criteria to say that I've done this, I can do this and that somebody has seen you do it and they've seen that it's correct and followed processes; CPD doesn't follow that path.

CPD: an ambiguous and contested concept

Confusion is apparent in the wide range of opinions on and attitudes to the aims and benefits of CPD expressed by participants in this study. To some extent this reflects wide differences in the nature of CPD policies and programmes themselves but this is not just because a set of professional bodies have designed CPD policies and programmes largely independently of each other (except for those in the Engineering and Construction sectors). It is also a reflection of the range of different and not completely compatible elements embraced by CPD.

However, participants agreed that CPD does not prove competence. Eraut (1994) would support this view. His discussion of the assessment of professional competence demonstrates the difficulties involved in gathering appropriate evidence. Such evidence should encompass both capability and performance, both of which

are required to assess range and use of knowledge. Eraut concludes that 'direct observation is the most valid and sometimes the only acceptable method of collecting evidence [for many types of competence]' (Eraut, 1994, p. 201).

Participants expressed several different purposes for their own participation in CPD. This does suggest that no one scheme can fulfil all the aspirations of professionals and professional associations, or take account of all preferences in terms of structure or learning style. Personal characteristics and circumstances, such as degree of self-discipline, level of seniority, time and funds available, will influence whether a preferred scheme would be voluntary or compulsory, structured or unstructured. Those that saw CPD as a means of keeping up-to-date tended to focus on learning that is specific to their profession and may look to their professional association to notify or warn them when new ideas or approaches were emerging in their field. Thus they may want at least part of the content of their CPD to be externally directed. If personal development and career progression is the motivation for CPD participation, individuals are more likely to review their CPD records and/or plan their CPD in the light of what they perceive as their own future requirements as well as what is currently needed.

A Way forward?

The Future for CPD: one or many concepts

There are two ways of viewing the current state of CPD. One is to see it as reflecting different interests and different social demands. This implies that CPD will always remain ambiguous and contested, at least as long as those interests and demands remain divided. It is therefore possible that CPD will fracture into different sets of activities with different labels. The other view is expressed by Ronald Cervero (2001) who argues that CPD, at the beginning of the 21st century, is in a similar state, in terms of coherence, size and stature, as the pre-service stage of professional education in the early 20th century. It is therefore in a state of transition. Houle (1980) and Young (1998) similarly regard systems of continuing education as being in a 'grand historical transition'. However, as Cervero highlights, and this research confirms, there are critical issues that must be addressed for CPD to fulfil its potential and make a demonstrable impact on the quality of professional practice.

There are advantages to combining several purposes under the label of CPD. Gardner argues that within CPD 'the purely educational element becomes one alongside others: a full professional life, good practice in general, career advancement, increasing capacity and well-earned profit (or its equivalent)' (Gardner, 1978, p. 5). CPD is therefore distinguished from continuing professional education in the UK as embracing and recognising informal learning that can be achieved during practice.

At the same time, it is important to recognise that the policies and programmes that are needed to support different elements of CPD will themselves differ. For example, using CPD to measure competence requires very different activities from using CPD for personal development. We cannot predict whether CPD will suc-

ceed, eventually, in encompassing all elements in a manner that the vast majority of professionals (and their clients and employers) feel is reliable and trustworthy. However, if the current ambiguities of CPD are to be resolved so that, as Cervero suggests, in a number of years CPD is considered in a similar light to initial qualifications, a clearer and more consistent approach needs to be taken by UK professional associations as a whole. Some broad agreement on the purposes and value of lifelong learning and the learning society will have to be reached in order to clarify the definition, aims and values of CPD to mitigate against demotivating factors such as confusion and perceived irrelevance.

Clarity of Purpose of CPD

Friedman *et al.* (2000) argue that professional associations should take the following into account when developing CPD policies and programmes:

- Clarity—of purpose and of practice
- Consistency
- Suitability—to the needs of members and the context in which the association operates
- Self-reflection
- External perspectives.

In view of the many competing claims for CPD and mutually exclusive models of CPD programmes (e.g. a programme cannot be both structured and unstructured, compulsory and voluntary), no single programme can satisfy all needs and cater for all preferences. The onus therefore falls on the professional association to engage in a dialogue with their members and other stakeholders in order to clearly define a set of compatible aims for their programmes and to draw up a programme which they feel best meets those aims. The programme should not only be actively promoted to members, but dialogue between professional associations and members should be ongoing to ensure that the programme remains relevant. If members can see why a certain approach has been adopted, even if it does not entirely suit the way they feel they learn best, they are more likely to participate.

The Importance of CPD and its Relation to Professionalism

Although the nature of professional work is itself contested, one distinguishing attribute identified in the literature is the learned nature of a professional occupation, i.e. the degree of training and education required (e.g. Carr-Saunders, 1928) or the application of particular and unique sets of knowledge and skills (Welsh & Woodward, 1989). Starr (and others, e.g. Wilensky, 1964) argue that a profession 'has a service, rather than profit, orientation enshrined in its code of conduct' (Starr, 1982, p. 15) so that conforming to a service ideal is also a key defining feature of the professions. Professionals are assumed to be self-regulating on an individual and corporate basis in terms of competence and ethics and responsible for service provision and outcomes.

A contrasting position was developed in the 1970s and 1980s and is currently dominant in sociological literature on the professions. This focuses on the monopoly position of professionals. According to Larson (1977, p. xvii), many occupations require specialised knowledge and skills, but the professions have translated these resources into social and economic rewards. The process of professionalisation involves manipulating perceptions about the degree of skill and judgement required to carry out professional tasks and task domains are monopolised by controlling entry through certification. According to Abbott (1988, pp. 8–9), it is through the development of a body of theory underlying their skills, a ‘knowledge system governed by abstractions’, that a profession is able to ‘redefine its problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems’.

In order to defend professionalism from the accusation that claims to professional competence and capability are allied to ambitions for status and power, CPD should be bound up with broader concepts of professionalism as a service to clients and society. Professional practice needs to be distinguished as practice under an ethical code. Indeed, most professional associations do explicitly state in their codes of conduct that members should maintain and update their knowledge and practice. As well as adherence to ideals of service, reflective practice, as conceptualised by Schön (1983, 1987), has also come to be considered a key element of professionalism. It is embedded in and arises from other ideals underpinning professionalism such as personal autonomy and responsibility, judgement and adherence to ethical norms. A commitment to reflection is increasingly becoming integral to CPD policies and programmes (Friedman *et al.*, 2000). But scope for reflection risks being impoverished by a focus on CPD as a form of credentialism, or as a means of increasing organisational competitiveness, or as a self-interested strategy for increasing job security as opposed to a means of personal development that continually refines and sharpens practice in the service of the client and society. Thus, linking CPD to ideals of professionalism offers one way of rescuing it from the ‘conceptual vagueness’ of learning society discourse.

CPD and the Measurement of Competence

The most difficult elements to reconcile under the CPD label are those related to providing an assurance of competence and those which support professional practice. On the one hand there is the paraphernalia of examination, monitoring and assessment designed to reveal ability to perform, usually at particular formal moments such as the end of courses. In addition there is the further step of linking knowledge and skills acquired to competence in the actual performance of professional tasks. On the other hand there is support for reflective professional practice with commonly informal methods and programmes that are developed quickly in response to the ongoing stream of issues that arise from daily practice. Eraut (2001, p. 11) suggests that professional learning does not take place in discrete, bite-sized chunks at off-the-job CPD events, but is an ongoing process where learning continues as the individual incorporates new learning through a significant period of practical experience. Daley (2001) also found that professionals construct their

learning by moving back and forward between CPD events and their professional practice. If such activities are not carried out, professional performance will deteriorate, but there is no simple or direct link with measurement of professional competence.

Inadequate methods and lack of diligence in evaluating the impact of CPD on practice has led to a belief, among the individuals who participated in this research project at least, that CPD cannot provide a demonstration of competence. One possibility that *could* follow from this is that CPD monitoring and assessment methods be standardised and made stricter. However, there is an alternative; that CPD should focus on learning and be divorced from requirements of audit or accountability. The examination of capability and competence is important, and more so in some professions than others, and should therefore be undertaken by a different means. The maintenance and enhancement of professional performance should be separate from its measurement. By harnessing development and measurement of competence together, there is a risk that both will be undermined. CPD is forced to accommodate irresolvable tensions that reduce perceptions of the benefits it can bring. How competence can be effectively gauged is beyond the scope of this research, but professionals themselves indicate that it must involve elements of peer review and direct observation.

We would therefore suggest that CPD might be better characterised as a support for improvements in professional practice. The policy type would probably be obligatory as there would be a strong expectation that professionals should carry out CPD as part of being 'a professional'. Monitoring would occur via peer review. There would be an emphasis on mentoring schemes and the prime CPD activities would be seen as support for reflective practice. The stimulation for CPD would not be that professionals become deficient as time goes on because of new knowledge generated outside of practice (such as in the research community), but rather that practice needs to be continuously refined and developed. The practice of CPD would not consist of a frequent series of updating or knowledge acquiring events, but rather a continuous process of learning through reflection. Professional associations may be unable to exert much influence on the wider discourse of the learning society, but they can ensure that their own policies and programmes cannot be accused of conceptual vagueness.

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Notes

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